



OCTOBER 14-  
DECEMBER 7, 2014

# CONTEMPORARY **SHAPESHIFTING** MASCULINITIES

## FACULTY AND STUDENTS RESPOND

Amber Kempthorn

Melissa Hackett '15

Joyce Lee '15

Morgan Hughes '15

Oliver Shin '15

Bjorn Olsen '15

James Parker '15

Katherine Stephens '15

Walker Maghie '16



## **ABOUT THE EXHIBITION AND “FACULTY/STUDENTS RESPOND”**

This exhibition brings together ten emerging and established artists who question, reframe, and explore perceptions and anxieties about evolving masculinities in the 21st century. The exhibition raises—but does not necessarily answer—questions about the relevance of the historical male role model, contemporary ideas about gender construction, and the purpose of fraternity.

The ten artists in SHAPESHIFTING can be loosely placed into three categories—evolving cultural terrain, gender normative behavior, and the role of fraternity. In the first grouping, Robyn O’Neil, Alec Soth, Sara Greenberger Rafferty, and Hank Willis Thomas mine different aspects of evolving attitudes toward gender roles. O’Neil’s *Hell* series signals the end of 20th-century male norms, while Soth’s *Broken Manual* project investigates the life of the contemporary hermit. Hank Willis Thomas addresses questions specific to African American men, and Greenberger Rafferty melts and morphs iconic male attire. Ideas about the formation and shattering of gender normative behaviors are found in the work of Marcella Hackbardt, Michael Scoggins, Kris Knight, and Weston Ulfig. Hackbardt’s young male dancers are beautiful yet somehow uncomfortable to view, and Scoggins’ oversized marker drawings ask us to remember a youthful self that fantasized about saving the day with larger than life super powers. Kris Knight subverts traditional ideas about the “male gaze,” while Weston Ulfig empowers the stereotype of young boys and guns. Finally, Brooks Dierdorff and Fall On Your Sword consider the role of fraternity through their critique of the actions, repercussions, and value of male bonding forged through sport.

Because the topic addressed in this exhibition is both driven by and will most affect the Millennials (ages 18-33), the CWAM invited students in two classes to write a response to an artist or piece that resonated with them. The two classes were Amber Kempthorn’s *Intermediate and Advanced Painting* (Amber also generously contributed a response), and Nancy Grace’s *First Year Seminar* class. Additionally, two CWAM gallery assistants contributed texts—Bjorn Olsen ’15 and James Parker ’15.

Kitty McManus Zurko, Director/Curator  
The College of Wooster Art Museum



## STUDENTS RESPOND

In *The Unmoored II*, Robyn O'Neil has rendered a flat field with a horizon line that is clearly delineated against a dramatically dark sky. The image's occupants are a mix of floating men in track suits and sneakers, cloaked figures, tree branches, and even an enormous severed head. Each of the figures are posed in different manners, some diving or falling or simply standing.

My initial impression of the piece was one of confusion. I could see how all the floating men and branches were representative of the title, but I wasn't sure how to read the objects themselves. Given the title of the overall series, *Hell*, I interpreted the drawing in terms of suffering and death. The men depicted here are perhaps people who have sinned, and are now stuck in this barren wasteland in various states of limbo, perpetually falling or tripping or simply trapped in a state of inertia.

I have no idea what the trees are about.

Oliver Shin '15  
Studio Art Major



**Robyn O'Neil**  
**The Unmoored II**, 2011  
Graphite on paper  
6 ½ h x 10 w (inches)  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Susan Inglett Gallery, New York

## STUDENTS RESPOND

Alec Soth's *The Arkansas Cajun's Backup Bunker* is from a series titled *Broken Manual*. The series captures scenes from the lives of hermits, survivalists, and fugitives. *The Arkansas Cajun's Backup Bunker* successfully captures the life of solitude experienced by these individuals.

In the foreground of the photograph stands a man dressed in a green flight suit and dress shoes. He appears at once completely natural and utterly out of place: his suit matches the backdrop of green forest behind him, yet his shoes and glasses suggest he is better suited in an office environment. His back arches back as he looks at a striped cat cradled in his arms and the cat returns the gaze. The man does not appear to care about the presence of the photographer, and the intimacy of the portrait is made even more severe by the absence of any other human. A plant to the far left of the frame is out of focus; as if the photographer was shooting from a distance, careful not to intrude on such a private moment.

Viewing the artwork feels as though one is happening upon a moment deserving of privacy. A path of compacted foliage leads to what one can assume to be the survivalist's shelter. The shelter consists of a portable storage unit with weathered 8 x 8 fence posts stacked at its base as rudimentary stairs. A glimpse inside of the container reveals it to be empty, or at least sparsely occupied; further adding to the distinct sense of isolation.

The surrounding landscape is composed of dense forest. Roughly one third of the photograph is dominated by a grey sky blanketing a green backdrop of forested hills. The landscape is vast and empty, providing the viewer with a sense of calm, silence, the kind of solitude one might expect living alone in the wilderness.

The work alters typical perceptions and stereotypes of hermits and survivalists. The man featured does not appear crazy nor paranoid. He looks satisfied; at peace with his life. The photograph does not idealize life lived in a storage container, and yet, I find myself wishing I could stand where Soth stood, surrounded by quiet, witness to contentment.



**Alec Soth**  
**The Arkansas Cajun's backup bunker, 2007**  
Framed archival inkjet print mounted to  
four-ply museum board  
36 h x 44 w (inches)  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Sean Kelly Gallery, New York  
©Alec Soth

## STUDENTS RESPOND

When used in reference to men of color, the word “boy” becomes a pernicious reminder that, in the eyes of society, their subservient status means that they are less than men. Hank Willis Thomas’s *I Am a Man* word paintings are a response to such denigrations. Here, Thomas uses simple affirmations, repetition, and playful variations on the phrase “I Am” to create a relationship between the paintings. Ultimately though, he questions what it means to exist, whether male or female.

Thomas also distills the essence of being by stripping away trivialities such as race and gender. The paintings convey an understated yet powerful message to the viewer in that we all need to transcend societal confines, and, in order to empathize, one only needs to exist.

James Parker '15  
Art History Major



Hank Willis Thomas  
**I Am Man, 2009**  
Liquitex on canvas  
25 ¼ h x 19 ¼ w x 2 ¼ d (inches)  
Framed  
Edition 2 of 3  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

## STUDENTS RESPOND

Looking at Sara Greenberger Rafferty's *Untitled*, I think of my brother when we were kids; he would wear out a pair of jeans as fast as he could get them, and my mother would always scoff at his ability to destroy such durable clothing so quickly. Through this memory and my understanding of the history of denim, I can't help but feel a certain masculine connotation when I look at this work—the wrinkles, the grainy texture of the medium, and the dark, mud-color revealing a few sections of blue. These blue jeans are, in my mind, a symbol of labor and rough-and-tumble nature typically associated with boyhood or a masculine figure. Perhaps the most interesting element of this work, for me at least, is the strange caramel-like substance that the pants seem to be slathered in. This goo extends beyond the confines of the image, and in areas the denim texture dissolves seamlessly, blurring the edges and the overall shape. I see this as a reflection of masculinity in our world today.

*Untitled* was created only last year, and the shift in culture we are experiencing defies boundaries and blurs the lines that place everything and everyone into neat categories. Sometimes the divisions that separate categories and people are thin, and for others they stand on either side of grand divider. This revolution is breaking apart our preconceived notions, just like these jeans fragmenting into tiny, individual pieces.

Katherine Stephens '15  
Studio Art Major



Sara Greenberger Rafferty  
**Untitled**, 2013  
Acrylic polymer and inkjet on acetate,  
Plexiglas and hardware  
55 h x 40 w x 1/2 d (inches)  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York



## STUDENTS RESPOND

Marcella Hackbardt's *All Boy* series features seven photographs of male dancers. Two of the three men in the group on the left are in ballet poses, with one, *Lance*, preparing to tap dance. Each image includes a ballet barre in the background, and the dancers concentrate on their engagement with dance form. Their positions are caught while in motion, and show attention to technique.

On the right are four images of young boys who display considerable personality through their attire, as can be seen in the shirt saying "Tough Guys Wear Pink" and the tipped fedora. Their charming poses with open arms and smiling faces invite the viewer into their world, while a shirtless and bare-chested boy seems to openly question the audience with his quizzical facial expression and tilted head.

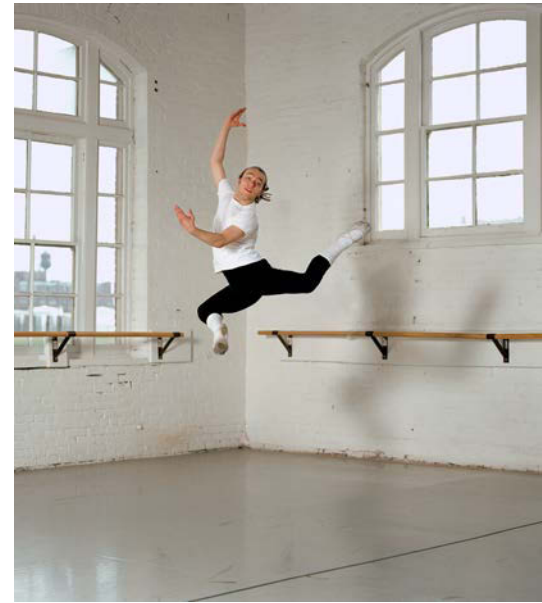
Dedicated to their craft, the older dancers appear to be skilled, male dancers in a stereotypically female dominated world of dance. The notion of dance as sport might even be their expectation instead of the female qualities of grace and beauty. Similarly, Hackbardt showcases the younger male dancers in an intimate world of isolation, with the difference being that the boys are unaware of the feminine binary standards of western dance culture.

Joyce Lee '16

Studio Art Major

Above: Marcella Hackbardt  
**Lance (Jump), Ballet Met,**  
**Columbus Ohio, 2007**  
Digital chromogenic print  
24 h x 27 w (inches)

Below: Marcella Hackbardt  
**West, Sweetheart Daycare,**  
**Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2007**  
Digital chromogenic print  
24 h x 27 w (inches)  
Courtesy of the artist



## STUDENTS RESPOND

Kris Knight's painting *Slumming It* contains overt, sexual elements that toy with our perception of voyeurism and the traditional objectification of the female form (think Edouard Manet's infamous *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863). However, in Knight's version, two clothed male figures are reclining in a meadow without the two nude and semi-nude females in Manet's painting. The men's touching shoulders and casual, inward lean suggest a different kind of homoerotic relationship.

Knight employs voyeurism by allowing us to observe the affection between the men. The male gaze we are so used to objectifying nude women with, however, is now met with two clothed male figures. Additionally jarring is the fact that the figures mirror our gaze and reflect it back to the viewer. It is almost as if they are daring us to "watch what is about to happen, we know you are there."

Bjorn Olsen '15

Studio Art Major



Edouard Manet  
(French, 1832–1883)  
**Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe**  
(Lunch on the Grass), 1863  
Oil on canvas  
© RMN -Grand Palais  
(Musée d'Orsay) / Hervé  
Lewandowski



Kris Knight  
**Slumming It**, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
36 h x 36 w (inches)  
Courtesy of the artist and  
MULHERIN, New York and Toronto

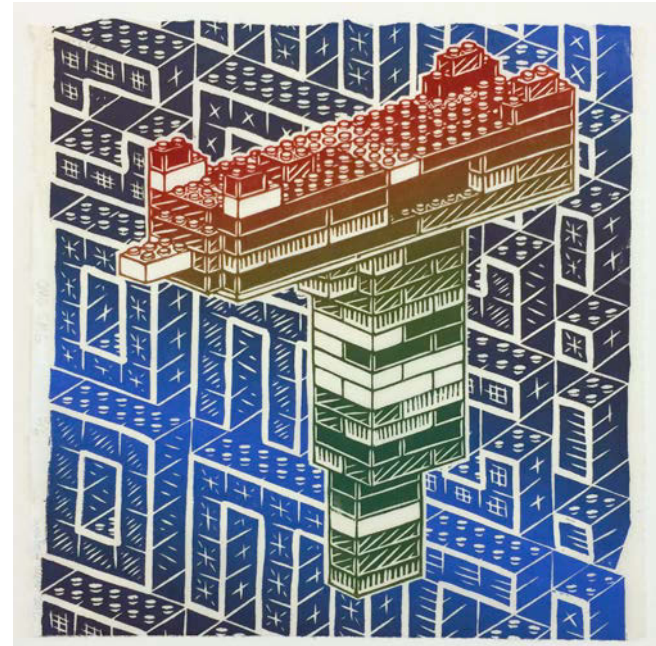
## STUDENTS RESPOND

*OMG SMG*, *OMG SMG #2*, and *Untitled* by Weston Ulfig illustrate not only the obsession with guns in today's culture, but also the loss of imagination in boyhood. (*OMG SMG* is an acronym for "Oh My God" and "SubMachine Gun.")

*Untitled* is a sculpture made entirely from LEGOs®, a cornerstone of boyhood. It is being used here as a creative tool not to reflect childhood fantasy, but to replicate an image of violence. The Uzi is not only a commentary on the loss of creativity and wonder that is cherished in boyhood, but the idolization of war and the soldier. LEGOs® are a reflection of role playing because what children build with LEGOs® is a reflection of self. This piece then, suggests the idea that boys are no longer being inspired by their own imaginations, but by images of war thrust upon them.

The two prints include the image of the LEGO® Uzi with the letters "OMG!" repeated across the background. Perhaps *OMG!* illustrates the shock of seeing an Uzi submachine gun made from LEGOs® because the two images are not ones that we are used to seeing together.

Walker Maghie '16  
Psychology Major



Weston Ulfig  
**OMG SMG**, 2012  
Relief print on paper  
12 h x 12 w (inches)  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Douglas Einer Olson

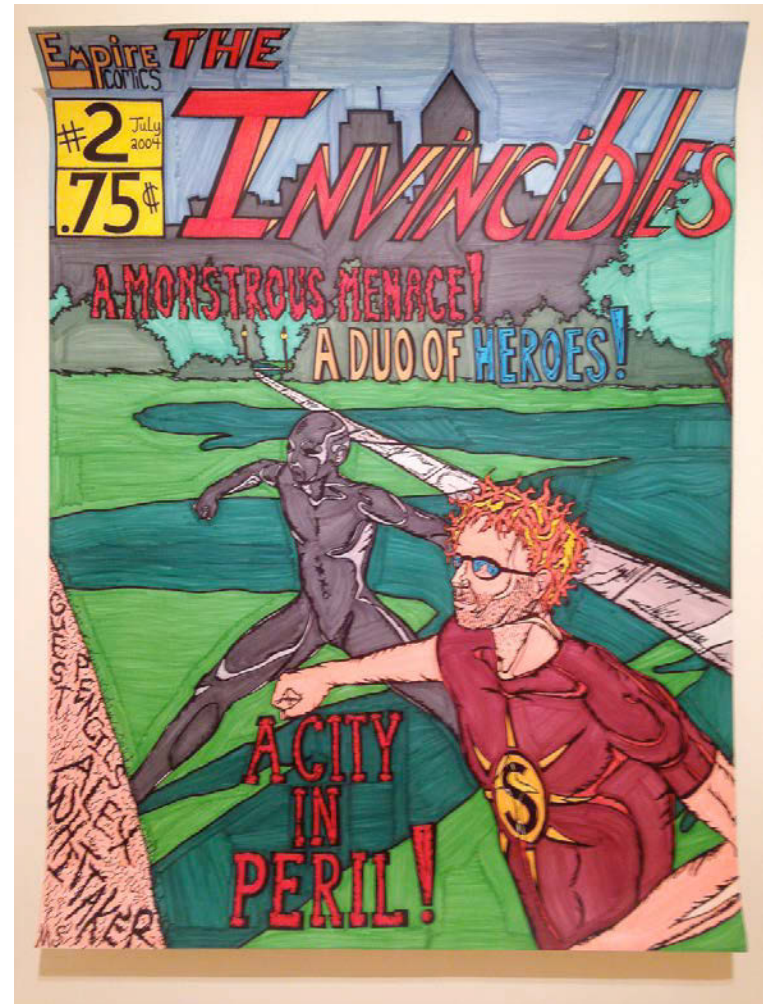
## FACULTY RESPOND

In Michael Scoggins' *The Invincibles #2*, viewers are presented with a hand-drawn, larger than life rendering of a make-believe comic book cover. Painstakingly rendered with Prismacolor and markers, the drawing conflates the tradition of comic book illustration with an adolescent's dreamy doodles. The text alerts us that a perilous situation is at hand through the cast shadow of an *off camera* villain who is about to be dealt two mighty blows by our heroes.

While the "monstrous menace" could be a fantastical sci-fi criminal it seems more likely that he is simply an oversized man. Indications of this can be found in the strip of hairy, pink flesh (in the lower left corner) that is similar to the skin of one of our heroes and in the reflection of that same do-gooder's sunglasses. Although Scoggins' drawing initially reads like a boy's flaccid super-hero daydream, with a title that drains any real drama from the plotline, its nondescript and unkempt heroes also suggest something more meaningful.

The drawing illustrates the age-old narrative of man vs. himself. And in contemporary culture, perhaps the more salient questions is "How are men responsible for their own undoing?" However, I prefer a more universal interpretation that acknowledges that we all grapple with the "monstrous menace" that so often is ourselves.

Amber Kempthorn  
Visiting Assistant Professor of Art



Michael Scoggins  
**The Invincibles #2**, 2006  
Marker, Prismacolor on paper  
67 h x 51 w (inches)  
Courtesy the artist and  
Freight + Volume Gallery, New York

## STUDENTS RESPOND

On a grassy lawn, a buck lies with its legs to one side. His head is raised, looking out at the viewer. The buck would never lay in such an unnatural position and the viewer can immediately tell that something is off. Its mouth hangs slightly open, with its ears drooping downwards. They're not upright like they should be. A gun rests idly on the deer's shoulder—barrel pointing upwards. All of these visual clues suggest that the deer is dead with its head being held up by some unseen force.

The photo is small and intimate like a photo taken to commemorate an event. With such a large space devoted to these small works, the viewer is urged to look closely and spend time with them. In his *Trophy* series, Brooks Dierdorff is erasing the victorious hunter, leaving the defeated creature. The artist urges the viewer to consider how hunters use these photographs to show their dominance over the animal and the natural world as a whole. By erasing the image of the hunter, Dierdorff intentionally shifts the viewers focus from the victor to the defeated, reversing the roles typically found in these kinds of images.

Melissa Hackett '15  
Studio Art Major



Brooks Dierdorff  
**Buck (From the Trophy Series)**, 2010  
Inkjet print  
5 h x 5 w (inches)  
Courtesy of the artist